Nature a Pledge of Grace.

A SERMON

SUGGESTED BY THE

TRANSIT OF VENUS, DECEMBER 6TH, 1882.

DELIVERED IN THE MEETING HOUSE OF THE

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA,

ON THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY.

By GEORGE DANA BOARDMAN,

Pastor.

GRACE THEOLOGICAL UNION LIBRARY 1962

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

BX
6333
B63
N38
1882

W/W10
B&S
LOWER
LIBRARY

PRINTED BY
ALLEN, LANE & SCOTT,
Nos. 229-231 South Fifth Street,
PHILADELPHIA.

BERKELEY BAPTIST
DIVINITY SCHOOL
LIBRARY

NATURE A PLEDGE OF GRACE.

Thus saith the Lord, If ye can break My covenant of the day, and My covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season; then may also My covenant be broken with David My servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne.—Jeremiah xxxiii. 20, 21.

The Transit of Venus.

To-day has occurred an event of rare spectacular interest; it was the transit of Venus. It was an event of great importance in the astronomical world: for transit observations have for their object the more accurate determination of the sun's horizontal parallax, and hence the earth's distance from the sun, and from that the respective distances from the sun of all the other planets; in other words, the dimensions of the solar system. The transit will not occur again till June 7th, 2004; an interval of one hundred and twenty-one years and a half. No wonder that countless eyes in various parts of the world have been gazing to-day with intense interest on the rare and important phenomenon.

But it is not my purpose to deliver an astronomical lecture. My purpose is even loftier; namely, to unfold and apply a great moral lesson which the transit of Venus suggests and confirms.

10759

The Transit an instance of Nature's Stability.

First of all, then, let me call your particular attention to this great fact: The ability to predict the transit of Venus was based on the stability of natural law. The transit was not an accident. Science knows no accidents. The transit was a natural event, occurring in due order of nature. For nature has its order, and that order is inexorable. Completely learn that order, and you shall completely recite nature's past, and completely foretell nature's future. Hence the favorite saying of Auguste Comte: "Science; whence prescience," that is, pre-science.

Distinguish Law and Force.

In fact, so universal and inflexible is natural law felt to be, that many of the votaries of science actually worship it, knowing no God but nature. They make the profound mistake of failing to distinguish between law and force. A law of nature in and by itself is not a force, it is only a statement of the way in which force works. For example: The law of gravity is not the same as the force of gravity: the law of gravity is simply a brief and comprehensive phrase, declaring the mode and rule according to which the gravitating force invariably works. The phrase does not answer such questions as the following:

"Why does the gravitating force invariably work according to this invariable rule? Why does every particle of matter in the universe inexorably tend to every other particle, mutually attracting and being mutually attracted with a force proportional directly to the quantity of their matter, and inversely to the squares of their distances? How comes it that what we call the gravitating force invariably works according to a definite, unalterable rule, which rule we call the law of gravity?" The atheist can not answer these questions. The Christian can. He believes that every atom in the universe inexorably tends to every other atom, because God, when He created these atoms, intended that they should always thus tend to each other. He believes that this invariable tendency of every atom to every other atom is as much the result of God's will as was the original creation of these atoms. All matter has this tendency, because this tendency is a part of God's settled plan, being one of His original and continued purposes. And because this tendency is invariable, universal, and ceaseless, men have discovered it, and they call it the law of gravity. I do not object to the phrase, provided it is not used as, alas! it too often is, to exalt law into force and to shut out a personal and ruling God from all connection with matter. The

truth is, this phrase, law of gravitation, means something more than that every atom in the universe tends to every other atom in a definite, invariable way; it also means the original and continued intention of Almighty God that it should be so. And what we affirm of the law of gravity, we affirm of all the laws of nature. They are not self-moving, self-determining forces; they are but certain invariable rules which Deity has chosen to prescribe to Himself, according to which He from the beginning determined that He would govern every atom of matter in the universe. The laws of nature are but the rules which Almighty God, as King of His own realm of matter, has devised and laid down for His own procedure.

The Laws of Nature are God's Covenant with Man.

Or, to put the matter in another way, and in accordance with our text, the laws of nature are God's covenant with man: "If ye can break My covenant of the day, and My covenant of the night." According to Holy Scripture, then, the ordinances of matter, the appointments and arrangements of the material universe, the laws of nature, are not only God's self-prescribed method of procedure; they are also actually His covenant. What we call the law of day and night is really God's promise to give us in

regular succession day and night, God's gracious engagement with man to alternate regularly light and darkness. This, in fact, as He had declared to the patriarch Noah, was what the rainbow should signify :—

Gen. ix. 12–17. This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: My bow I do set in the cloud; and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth; and it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living being of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh; and the bow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.

Not that the rainbow itself was God's covenant that He would never again flood the earth; it was but His appointed token of such a covenant; "My bow I set in the cloud; and it shall be for a covenant-sign between Me and the earth." Accordingly, every time we see it arching the horizon, the God of the rainbow bids us to accept it as His personal pledge that while the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. The laws of nature, then, are God's covenant with man.

Gen. viii. 22.

Secret of the Ability to Predict the Astronomical Future.

And just because the laws of nature are God's covenant—in other words, God's self-prescribed rules of procedure—the laws of nature are stable, to be depended on absolutely. Hence the ability to predict, for example, the astronomical future. Precisely because the laws of nature are stable, the astronomer was able to predict that there would be a transit of Venus on December 6th, 1882. Precisely because the laws of nature are stable, the astronomer is able to predict that there will not be another transit of Venus till after an interval of one hundred and twenty-one years and a half. Precisely because the laws of nature are stable, the astronomer is able to predict that, after the next transit of Venus on June 7th, 2004, there will be another transit eight years afterwards, namely, June 5th, 2012. Every one of these predictions is based on the absolute stability of natural law. So supreme was the confidence of the astronomers in the unchangeableness of the laws of nature, so absolute their conviction that Venus would apparently begin to cross the sun's disc at 9 h. 2 m. 45 s. A. M. Philadelphia time, December 6th, 1882, that in order to witness the phenomenon they have not hesitated to make large personal sacrifices, involving months of laborious and costly preparations and long

and perilous journeys to remote and savage spots of earth; and this, too, in utter ignorance of what the weather would be when the critical moment should arrive. So morally certain were they that the transit would take place at the moment predicted that they hesitated not to risk the elaborate and costly preparations of years and of continents on the chance of a few minutes of fair weather at certain hours on the sixth day of December, 1882. It was a sublime instance of men's faith in nature. And the issue has justified the faith. The transit of Venus has taken place precisely as it had been predicted it would; and so another august witness took the stand to-day to testify to the unchangeableness of nature's laws, that is to say, to the veracity of God's covenant of nature.

Meaning of our Text for the Jews.

And now to our text. Our prophet represents God as using the stability of His administration of nature as the pledge of the stability of His administration of grace:—

> Thus saith the Lord:—
> If ye can break My covenant of the day and My covenant of the night,
> So that there should not be day and night in their season:
> Then also My covenant with David My servant shall be broken,
> That he shall not have a Son to reign upon his throne.

These words were spoken in the darkest period of Hebrew history. The disobedience and obduracy of generations was just issuing in the shame and despair of the Babylonian captivity. But amid this terrible downfall, this apparently hopeless wreck of the Jewish nationality, one blessed memory survived; it was the remembrance of God's covenant with David. More than four centuries before Jeremiah, God, through the mouth of His prophet Nathan, had said to the man after His own heart:—

II. Samuel vii. 12, 13, Acts ii. 30, 31.

When thy days shall be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy Seed after thee, who shall proceed from thy loins, and I will establish His kingdom; He shall build a house for My name; and I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever.

And now, amid the horrors and despair of the Babylonian siege, God would comfort His servant Jeremiah, and the few who, like Jeremiah, had remained loyal, by assuring them that His covenant with David was as inviolable as His covenanted laws of nature:—

Jer. xxxi. 35–37; xxxiii. 14–26.

Thus saith the Lord:—
Who appointed the sun for light by day,
And the ordinances of the moon and the stars for light by night;

Who stirreth up the sea, and its waves roar;
The LORD of hosts is His name;
If My covenant be not with day and night,
If I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth;
If these ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord,
If ye can break My covenant of the day and of the night,
So that there should not be day and night in their season:
Then also shall My covenant with David be broken,
That no son of his shall reign on his throne.

Thus the God of nature bids His servant Jeremiah accept His inviolable covenant of day and night, of sun and moon and stars—in other words, the stability of nature's law—as the resistless argument for, and the infallible sign and pledge of the stability of His covenant with David. And the issue proved that the covenant of the promised Messiah was as inviolable as the covenant of day and night. Jesus the Christ was born from the loins of David. And as the transit of Venus, after many a year of prediction, proves the inviolability of God's covenant of nature, so the birth of Jesus Christ, of the house and lineage of David, six hundred years after Jeremiah's prophecy, and a thousand years after the original covenant with David, proves the inviolability of God's covenant of grace. And so was fulfilled the blessed Maschil of Ethan the Ezrahite:—

BERKELEY BAPTIST
DIVINITY SCHOOL
LIBRARY

Psalm lxxxix. 34-37.

My covenant will I not break,
Nor alter what hath gone forth from My lips.
Once have I sworn by My holiness:
I will not lie unto David.
His Seed shall be forever,
And His throne as the sun before Me;
As the moon shall it stand fast forever,
And as the witness in the skies is faithful.

Meaning of our Text for Ourselves.

Having thus explained the prophet's words in their bearing on his own countrymen and generation, we are prepared for the general lesson which they teach all lands and all times—it is this: The stability of natural law an argument for and a pledge of the stability of moral law.

Stability of Moral Law.

No one doubts the stability of natural law. We talk indeed of breaking the laws of nature, violating the laws of health, and the like. But the language is manifestly loose. By no manner of possibility can we break a single law of nature. It is the laws of nature which, if we do not obey them, break us. For example; a man lives a life of sensuous excesses and dies. Why does he die? Because he has broken the laws of health? No; he dies because the laws of

health would not be broken, they insisted on having their own way, they broke him. The laws of nature are absolutely inviolable. Think you that the laws of morals are any less inviolable? Shall the God who rules the natural world with a sceptre so sovereign and changeless, rule the spiritual world with a feeble and vacillating wand? While the world of matter is under the reign of law and order, is the world of spirit under the reign of chance and caprice? No; when you can break God's covenant with matter, then, it may be, you can break God's covenant with spirit.

True of Sin.

Think not, then, that sin will ever go unpunished. You can no more break God's law of righteousness than you can break God's law of gravitation. Hurl yourself against the law of gravitation by leaping from a pinnacle; do you break the law of gravitation? No; the law of gravitation breaks you, for there you lie, a crushed, dead body. Hurl yourself against the law of righteousness by leaping from the pinnacle of sonship to the eternal Father; do you break the law of righteousness? No; the law of righteousness breaks you, for there you lie a crushed, dead soul. Sin and punishment are as indissoluble as cause and effect. True, you may not in every

instance see the punishment: for the consequences of sin, though always inevitable, are not always apparent. As force in nature, although indestructible, is capable of assuming different guises of motion, as, for instance, heat, light, electricity, so the consequences of sin may appear in various forms, either in this world or in the next, either in remorse or in penitence, either in your own person or in the person of Him who Himself bare our sins in His own body on the tree. But whatever the form of the consequence, the law of sin and punishment is as inexorable as the law of cause and effect.

I. Peter ii. 24.

True of Righteousness.

And as it is with sin, so it is with righteousness. That every true service for God, the very tiniest as well as the very grandest, shall sooner or later receive its full reward, is as absolutely certain as that God exists. And this for two reasons: First, it is of the very nature of righteousness that it should issue in reward, even as it is of the very nature of cause that it should issue in effect. And, secondly, in addition to the inherent, inviolable nature of righteousness, God has solemnly given His own personal promise in this direction, and this in many an explicit Scripture. Take, for example, the promise of our text. While God's covenant with David, taken in

its literal, technical sense, was a personal, and, so to speak, physiological covenant, meaning the Davidic progenitorship of the promised Messiah or Christ; yet the covenant, taken in its moral, essential sense, was a spiritual covenant, meaning the setting up of a spiritual kingdom along the line of David's Son and Lord; a kingdom which should be universal and lasting, because spiritual. Thus interpreted, God's covenant with David was a universal covenant, offered to you and to me as well as to the son of Jesse, and involving all God's promises, even every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus; for it is in Him who was of the house and lineage of David that God's promises are the yea and the amen. And as it was in the days of Jeremiah, so it is in ours: God still points to His inflexible ordinances of heaven and earth, His unchangeable appointments of sun and moon and stars, His irreversible covenant of day and night, as the pledges of the eternal inviolability of His promises in Jesus Christ. Yes, as certainly as there is a gravitating force which works according to an unchanging law, so certainly will Jesus Christ and whoever is Jesus Christ's yet win a limitless and reverseless triumph; for to this Almighty God has solemnly pledged the very inexorableness of the laws of the

Matt. xxii. 41-45.

II. Cor. i. 20.

nature He Himself has ordained. Ay, God's covenant of grace is even more certain than God's covenant of nature. Heaven and earth shall yet pass away, but never God's word.

II. Peter iii. 10-13. The very elements themselves shall melt with fervent heat; but out of the ashes of the wrecked globe shall rise in immortal resurrection the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Less hopeless, then, is it to attempt to reverse the laws of nature than the laws of grace; less absurd to fight against gravitation than against Christianity; less idiotic to undertake to annihilate matter than to avert the coming coronation of the covenanted Son of David.

The great Lesson of the Transit. This then is the great lesson of the transit of Venus—the stability of natural law, the symbol and the pledge of the stability of moral law; or, more briefly, nature a pledge of grace.

Let me conclude with an inference and with a word of cheer.

The Spirit of Prophecy the Testimony to Jesus. And, first, the inference. We can not, in the light of our subject, fail to be impressed with the conviction that the prophets of the Old Testament must have been inspired. For, while astronomers base their predictions on ascertained facts and stable

laws, prophets hazarded their predictions on countless unforeseen contingencies. It is evident that a problem is difficult in proportion to the number of elements it involves. Thus, while it is comparatively easy to solve an astronomical problem in which only two mutually attracting bodies are considered, the problem of determining the motions of three mutually attracting masses, or the problem of Three Bodies, as it is called, was one from which even the genius of a Newton recoiled. Amazing as was his analytic power, even Newton was baffled in his attempts to reduce the perturbations of the planets to formulas, pronouncing the problem insoluble, and expressing the apprehension that these, as he supposed, uncalculable perturbations might some day plunge creation into chaos. Nevertheless the genius of subsequent mathematicians has solved this problem of Three Bodies; and this solution was possible, because the laws of the heavenly bodies are stable, and only need to be discovered, in order to our being able to predict the planetary future. In fact, these perturbations themselves are such splendid instances of the stability of natural law that it was on the basis of them that the existence and place of the planet Neptune were predicted before it was discovered by the telescope. On the other hand, man, in distinction from sun and

planet, atom and gravitation, is a living conscious power, endowed with freedom of choice and capacity of will and self-motion. This introduces into the problem of the prophet an element of infinite complexity and uncertainty; it is that most inconstant, capricious, uncalculable of things—human free will. Accordingly, how countless the number, how complicated the unforeseen relations, which a single human will introduces into any single Messianic prophecy, or prediction of the Christ! Doubtless mind has its laws not less than matter. And these laws may be discovered, as indeed many of them have been. But no discovery of the laws of mind, no reduction of them to formulas, no combination of these formulas, can help me as a prophet of a far-off future. I may discover the laws or modes according to which the human will moves; but I can not predict far in advance the direction of the movements of a single human will. That depends on untold myriads of absolutely unforeseen contingencies. No humanly devised theory of probabilities is broad enough to solve, no human calculus is searching enough to analyze the perpetually variant fluxions of human motives, choices, and caprices. And if the solution of the famous problem of Three Bodies, in a department of investigation where everything proceeds according to definite, invariable,

clearly ascertained laws, was achieved only after the most laborious and protracted mathematical calculations by men endowed with marvelous analytic power, what shall we say of the infinite intricacy of the problems which lay before the Old Testament prophets, when they foretold, ages in advance, minute details touching the career of the coming Christ, and hazarded their minute predictions on the perfectly uncalculable movements of man's free will;—nay, more, on the infinitely varying thoughts and emotions and volitions of millions of men and women and children during hundreds of years?

Oh! brethren and friends, the argument, as I know you must feel, is absolutely overwhelming! If the transit of Venus on December 6th, 1882, in precise answer to the predictions of astronomers as based on the stable, inviolable, demonstrated laws of the natural universe, proves that God administers His material creation with an even, unwavering, inexorable hand; then the birth of Jesus Christ, in exact accordance with the predictions of the prophets—predictions hinged on the ever fluctuating volitions, and the sudden, uncalculable caprices of millions of men, and this during hundreds of years,—proves that Almighty God has had from the beginning an irreversible plan, and that the prophets of the Old Testament, in pre-

dicting as they did, were moved by His inspiration. When, for example, I read in the Old Testament that Immanuel was to be born of a virgin, and of the line of David, and in the town of Bethlehem: and when I read in the New Testament that centuries after these predictions Immanuel was born of a virgin, of the line of David, in the town of Bethlehem: when I remember that these minute, precise predictions were hazarded on the capricious impulses and secret plans of millions of unborn men, scattered through Asia, Africa, and Europe, on the rise and fall of coming empires, the edicts of kings, the intrigues of politicians, the schemes of merchants, the tears of widows, the prayers of saints, the curses of reprobates, and all these for hundreds of years: when I remember that the resultant of these inconceivably numerous and complex forces was at last made to converge into one Person, out of unnumbered millions, and in one little, obscure spot of Palestine, out of the whole wide earth—when I remember all this, I feel a resistless force laid on me which compels me to confess that God is infinitely wise and strong, foreseeing from the beginning all things, and predetermining all things, because He had foreseen them. Verily, the spirit of prophecy is the testimony to Jesus. And if the

Psalm lxxxix. 3, 4: Isaiah vii. 14; Micah v. 2.

Matt. i. 18, 23; Luke ii. 1-6.

Rev. xix. 10.

transit of Venus, in exact answer to the predictions of astronomers, proves that astronomy is true, and that you can not resist the God of nature, does not the birth of Jesus Christ, in exact answer to the predictions of prophets, prove, and for an unspeakably stronger reason, that Christianity is true, and that you can not resist the God of Scripture?

Trust God absolutely.

Lastly: The issue of all that has been said to-night is in a word of cheer to all who love God; and the word of cheer is this: Trust your heavenly Father absolutely. All nature is pledged to the inviolability of God's promises, and therefore all nature is pledged to give you good cheer. You can not be loyal to infinite God in vain. As neither man nor Satan can break God's covenant of nature, so neither man nor Satan can break God's covenant of grace. Let the wise men of science convene in congress; let the high priests of nature gather in solemn conclave; let them deliberate and decree, saying: "Venus, cross not the sun's disk; light, slacken thy speed; earth, cease to roll; gravitation, lay down thy force." But lo, Venus does cross the sun's disk; light does throb as swiftly as ever; earth does continue to roll; gravitation does still balance creation. You can not

break God's ordinances of heaven and earth, God's covenant of day and night, God's laws of nature. These He has solemnly pledged as the guarantee of His own personal veracity, bidding us accept the constitution of the physical universe as the very oath and sacrament of the inviolability of His promises in Jesus Christ; and so, by these two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong consolation who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us. Strong as that oath and sacrament was in the prophet's day, how much stronger it is in ours, when the telescope daily brings us fresh instances of the inviolability of natural law! Every fulfillment of an astronomical prediction is a fresh witness to the veracity of God's promises. He is in very truth the covenant-keeping God. Let not, then, the transit of Venus to-day speak to you in vain. Let its celestial eloquence cheer and inspire you. Go forth, my brother, in the strengthened conviction that your Father in heaven is to be supremely trusted. Ay, blessed are all they who put their trust in Him.

Heb. vi. 18.

Collect. O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles, mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

LIBRARY RULES

1. **No book may be taken fro**
without being charged to t
Borrowers are responsible
age done to the volumes w
possession and are expected to make good all losses.

2. (a) **Reserve Books** may be borrowed for a period of two hours. In case no call has been made in the interval, books may be renewed for a second two hours. (Where there is only one copy, book must be used in the library.)

   (b) Reserve books taken at 10 p. m. Mondays to Fridays are due at 9 a. m. the next morning. A reserve book taken from the library at 12 m. Saturday is due at 9 a. m. the following Monday.

3. Books not on reserve may be drawn from the library for two weeks and may be renewed once for the same period, except one-day books.

4. A fine of two cents a day will be charged on each book which is not returned according to the above rule.

5. MAGAZINES ARE NOT to be taken from the library without the special permission of the librarian.

GTU LIBRARY
3 2400 00561 8057

GTU Library
2400 Ridge Road
Berkeley, CA 94709
For renewals call (510) 649-2500
All items are subject to recall.

WW10
B63
n
10759